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BUTLER'S

ARGUMENT ON MIRACLES,

Explained and Defended.

THE MIRACLES.

BUTLER'S ARGUMENT ON MIRACLES,

Explained and Defended:

WITH OBSERVATIONS ON

HUME, BADEN POWELL, AND J. S. MILL.

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TO WHICH IS ADDED

A CRITICAL DISSERTATION

BY

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BY THE

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DUBLIN:
HODGES, SMITH AND CO., 104, GRAFTON-STREET,
BOOKSELLERS TO THE UNIVERSITY

1863.

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INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS.

In preparing lectures on the Second Part of 'The Analogy' of Butler, for the Young Men's Christian Association in connection with the United Church, I had to consider the objections which have been raised against the accuracy of Butler's argument on the question of miracles. I had been inclined to believe that however abstruse or obscure his reasoning might at first seem, it would be found that he had not lapsed into any fallacy. Having studied the text with much deliberation, I communicated with some of the most competent students of Butler, and the result has been that although I found a difference of opinion on the subject, I have such authoritative support for the conclusions at which I arrived, that I am encouraged to submit them to the consideration of others who take an interest in the study of Butler.

The clear and admirable dissertation of Mr. Mansel, which I am enabled to give in the Appendix, is in itself a valuable contribution to the interpretation of Butler and to the discussion on the credibility of miracles. The general subject has already received from him such a treatment in "The Aids to Faith," as to leave little, if anything, to be added to that most able essay. It was no small satisfaction to me to find

that the view which I had taken of the argument of Butler (which is said by some to be apocryphal,) coincided in the main with that which Mr. Mansel had adopted. In the first lecture I have endeavoured to state and explain this view. The second lecture was intended, not only to complete but to clear up what had been opened in the first; and both are now offered to the public with a hope that they may, in some degree help to elucidate a confessedly difficult part of 'The Analogy.'

I have here given them just as they were delivered before the class. I may add that subsequent discussion of the subject has quite satisfied me that the chief difficulty is in getting the student to place himself at Butler's stand-point, so as to view the question from this exact position.

REVELATION AS MIRACULOUS.

In proceeding to deal with the supposed peculiar presumptions from the analogy of nature against a revelation considered as miraculous, Butler first disposes of the objection against the general scheme—that God created and invisibly governs the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom He will judge it in righteousness, *i. e.*, render to every one according to his works, and that good men are under the influence of the Holy Spirit. It is not important whether this scheme be called miraculous or not, for if the analogy of nature raises any presumption against it, this must be, either because it is not discoverable by reason or experience, or because it is unlike that course of nature which is. As to the first, there is a general answer—we see but in part, we know but in part. He puts the case of a man of the most improved understanding, fully acquainted with the whole of natural philosophy and natural religion, but who had not heard of revelation; such a man could not but feel that in the past, present, and future of God's general government, there was very much hidden from him that he could not discover and of which he must be ignorant without revelation. What is open to us is

but a point in the vast and boundless system of the universe; it is but a very small part of the whole scheme of this world. And as there must be innumerable things in the constitution and government of the universe which are thus *beyond the natural reach of our faculties*, there is no sort of presumption against the truth and reality of any of the things which we *cannot* ourselves discover. As to the second, there is no presumption against any of the things contained in the general scheme as described, upon account of their being *unlike the known course* of nature. For analogy does not warrant us in presuming that the *whole* course of things *naturally unknown*, and *every* thing in it, is like to *any* thing in that which is known. In the natural and the moral government of the world we see things in a great degree unlike each other, so that we may not be surprised at such unlikenesses between things visible and invisible.

The scheme of Christianity, indeed, is by no means entirely unlike the course of nature, as will hereafter be shewn. In truth there will be found throughout both, such an identity of principle as shews that the Author of Nature is the God of Revelation. There are profound harmonies in nature, man, and heaven. There is no presumption from analogy against a revelation *as miraculous*, at the beginning of the world. *A miracle, in its very notion, is relative to a course of nature, and implies somewhat different from it, considered as being so.* What the course of nature was, if any, upon the first peopling of the worlds, we know not—so that the question of whether a revelation was then given, is a common question of fact, and may be established by the like evidence as convinces us of other matters of fact of the same antiquity. The power then exerted was different from the present course of nature, but we cannot therefore properly call it miraculous: and whether it is so called or considered, does not alter the

argument, for it cannot but be admitted that such a power was actually exerted. The question then is—in what manner and degree did this power exert itself; whether it stopped after the creation of man, or exerted itself further in giving him a revelation? So far as history and tradition testify as to this matter, they rather indicate that religion was not reasoned out at the first, but came into the world by revelation. This has already been noticed in the 13th paragraph of the 6th chap. of Part I.

A further objection is supposed—That there may be some peculiar presumption from analogy against miracles, particularly against revelation, *after the settlement and during the continuance of a course of Nature.* To this objection he gives a two-fold answer. There is no part of Butler's writings, which has been so adversely criticised, as the portion of the chapter in which this answer is set forth; and to this I would now direct your particular attention.

We have in print the objections which have been taken by Bishop Fitzgerald, and also what occurred to Dr. Chalmers; they have been followed by others, who have yielded to the great authority of these eminent commentators.

I have corresponded with my friend Mr. Mansel, of Oxford, an authority inferior to none on this subject; he has explained his views in a clear and masterly paper, which, with his kind permission, I am at liberty to use, as I think fit. Dr. Lee, of Trinity College, is the author of a valuable Essay on Miracles, in which he upholds Butler with characteristic learning and ability; and Professor Webb, who is eminently conversant with the writings of Butler, is to be found also on the side of his supporters in this controversy. The argument, in its nature, calls for a thoughtful attention; it seems at first subtle if not obscure. Objectors differ in their exceptions, and they are not exactly of one mind as to

the meaning of the text on which they comment. On the other hand, those who take the side of Butler also differ to some extent, rather on the exact interpretation of his words than on the substance of his argument. None of these differences touch any thing vital in the great question of the credibility of revealed religion.

I propose to offer you the explanation of Butler's argument which I am satisfied to adopt. The objection arises out of this—that there is a supposed *peculiar* presumption from analogy against miracles (particularly against revelation), *after the settlement and during the continuance of a course of nature.* Revelation, as a direct message from God to man, has in its very nature a miraculous character, for it supposes God to interfere in human affairs in a way that is designedly different from, though relative to the settled course of nature to which our experience bears witness. Therefore, any peculiar presumption against it arises from what is exceptional in its character, as an interference with what we experience to be the settled course of nature, and it is the same that might be suggested against miracles *in general, i. e.*, against *any miraculous interposition.* It is founded on this, that God will continue to govern the world by *general* laws only, inasmuch as all things may be presumed to continue as we experience they are, in all respects except those in which we may have reason to think they will be altered. Now keep steadily in your minds that this supposed antecedent presumption against miraculous interposition, is the peculiar presumption which Butler here proceeds to deal with. His first observation on it is, that as we have no parallel case of the history of some other world seemingly in like circumstances with our own, we have no ground for raising what can with propriety be called an argument from analogy, for or against revelation considered as miraculous—that is to say,

for or against such a Divine interference with a settled course of nature as would amount to a miraculous interposition. So far there is no difficulty—the argument is plain and intelligible. But he proceeds to a more detailed argument with reference to the supposed peculiar presumption. He makes *four particular observations*. The first and second of these are treated as the premises to a conclusion which is drawn from both when taken together, and it is material to attend to the very words in which Butler has expressed this inference. At the end of the second particular observation he says, "And from this" (*i. e.* the second of the four) "joined with the foregoing observation" (*i. e.* the first of the four), "it will follow that there must be a presumption beyond all comparison greater against the *particular* common facts just now instanced in, than against miracles in *general*, before any evidence of either."

Observe, then, that what he expressly professes to have dealt with in the first and second of the four *particular* observations (as he calls them) is the presumption against *particular* common facts of a specified class—and the presumption against miracles *in general* (*i. e.* against miraculous interposition); and the presumptions which he compares one with the other, are such only as can arise *before any evidence in either case.* Keep this steadily in your minds. In fact he is discussing a supposed presumption that is of the nature of a preliminary objection. This presumption in every case of alleged miraculous interposition is supposed by the objector to shut out evidence as inadmissible, because (he says) it is insufficient to prove that, against which, from its very nature, there is a *peculiar* presumption arising *prior to any evidence:* and, thus, (as is supposed by the objector) the case of revelation is put out of court in the first instance, without allowing its evidence to be brought forward at all.

The analogy to which Butler first directs attention is that

of the presumption which arises against common speculative truths and against ordinary facts, before the proof of them, and which may be overcome by almost any proof. He adds—"there is a presumption of millions to one against the story of Cæsar or of any other man. *For*, suppose a number of facts so and so circumstanced, *of which one had no kind of proof*, should happen to come into one's thoughts, every one would, without any possible doubt, conclude them to be false. And the like may be said of a single common fact." He deals here with those contingencies in the course of common life, which cannot be reduced or referred to laws or rules, and are therefore called *accidental:* all these are dependent on countless combinations which we cannot control, and on influences of which we are ignorant. The truth and reality of all such matters are therefore certified by some kind of proof. In chap. iv. par. 4, he observes, "The laws by which persons born into the world at such a time and place, are of such capacities, geniuses, and tempers;" (ex. gr. the case of Cæsar or any other man) "the laws by which thoughts come into our minds in a multitude of cases; and by which innumerable things happen of the greatest influence upon the affairs and state of the world; *these laws are so wholly unknown to us that we call the events which come to pass by them as accidental:* though all reasonable men know certainly that there cannot in reality be any such thing as chance; and conclude that the things which have this appearance are the result of general laws and may be reduced into them." (Oxf. Ed. 190).

There are countless incidents in common life to which he further refers in the next page (191), which we cannot bring under general laws, and which by reason of our limited knowledge and capacity, are relatively to us contingent; so that before they are certified by proof of some kind, the antecedent presumption against any particular accidental fact

or connected set of facts of this class, is at least 'millions to one:'—and our mental constitution is so framed that if any one *such* fact, or a connected set of such facts, should happen to come into our minds, *of which we had no kind of proof*, we must conclude it or them to be false; and therefore, without evidence, we cannot admit their truth and reality. The supposition of a fact or set of facts happening to come into one's head, is merely put by Butler to illustrate the mental law; and to shew that to certify any of this class of accidental facts, as he has himself explained their nature, proof is to us a matter of necessity, for without some degree of evidence we could not believe in the truth of any such facts.

In chap. vi. par. 10 he says, "The ground of these observations, and that which renders them just and true is, that doubting necessarily implies some degree of evidence for that of which we doubt. For *no person would be in doubt concerning the truth of a number of facts so and so circumstanced, which should accidentally come into his thoughts and of which he had no evidence at all.*" That is to say—that in such a case, there would be no doubt of the facts so coming into the mind, being unreal and false; if there was any doubt, there must be some degree of evidence, but if there is no evidence at all—no kind of proof—then the falsehood of the matter is certain. He seems here to have repeated the very same illustration, simply to shew what the mental law is, and the effect of the absence of any kind of proof. This shews how untenable is the objection which supposes him to have suggested that the story of Cæsar or the like might come into a man's head by accident, or that a set of facts might first come into the head, and that these might be afterwards deposed to as true and real, by some credible witness. It appears to me an entire misconception of the meaning of his words and the scope of his argument which implies the very contrary of this—for he does

not propose to shew that any man might, by second sight or clairvoyance or otherwise without evidence get what was true and real into his head, but on the contrary says, that if any facts of the class described, of *which one had no kind of proof*, should happen to come into one's head, he ought to conclude that they were false and unreal. Just as in dreaming, facts come into the head which are found to be unreal when we are conscious that we had no kind of evidence of them. So in cases of insanity, generally known as 'notional,' a matter is taken to be true and is treated as real, being in fact but a delusion which has happened to come into the head, not as a designed fiction, or a conscious invention, but what a sane person takes to be false, *because it is without any kind of proof*. The very essence of the delusion consists in the insane person accrediting that as true and real of which there is no kind of evidence.

The common phrase that we use at times—"he has taken into his head so and so," supposes the existence of the mental law which is observed in accidental circumstances, and has been appropriately illustrated by the supposition which Butler has made, in order to shew the materiality of proof in all cases of such contingent common facts. So much then for the presumption against a particular accidental fact before evidence. Next comes the presumption which is peculiar to miracles *in general*, that is to say, to miraculous interposition. This presumption is additional to that which has been already explained as arising out of contingency, and it is *peculiar*, because it arises out of the exceptional character of the alleged interference with the settled course of Nature. Butler describes it as a small presumption, which, though additional and peculiar, yet cannot be estimated, and is relatively as nothing. It is the supposed peculiar presumption against miracles *in general*, which he thus characterizes. It may be weak or strong, small

or great, in proportion as we can say whether there may or may not have been a reasonable ground for any interference with the settled course of nature. We may be so conscious of our ignorance as to be unable to arrive at any definite conclusion, or to estimate the peculiar presumption that has been supposed. And therefore it is that in his second particular observation he takes the case on the lowest ground, so as to meet the unbelieving objector on his own level. Arguing the question without reference to the moral facts and religious reasons which justify the expectation (as they shew the importance) of a Divine revelation to man, how does the case stand? If we leave out the consideration of Religion, we are then in such total darkness as to the causes, occasions, reasons and circumstances on which the present course of Nature depends, that we could not say whether there may or may not have been reasons for miraculous interposition. That is to say—in the very circumstances favourable to the objection, viz., those in which the peculiar antecedent presumption is supposed to arise—it is found that such a presumption cannot be estimated; therefore, Butler concludes from the two observations together, the presumption against a particular *contingency* as described, is incomparably greater than the supposed peculiar presumption against miracles *in general*, before any evidence of either.

I have adverted to the misconception of the way in which Butler illustrates the law, by which proof of some kind is made essential to certify the truth of a particular contingency; and having pointed out the misconception, I need not criticise the comments which are not applicable to what I take to be his true meaning. It is not in this part of his argument that he is so generally supposed to have lapsed into fallacy, as in that where he speaks of the additional peculiar presumption

as small and also as incapable of estimation, as virtually or relatively amounting to nothing. He is said not to have distinguished between "improbability before the fact, and improbability after the fact," where he deals with the presumption against miracles:—and he is also said to have confounded improbabilities antecedent to proof, with "improbabilities against proof," when he deals with the presumption against particular common facts. I do not stop to criticise these expressions, though they have not the philosophical precision that is desirable in any adverse criticism on so cautious and accurate a writer as Butler. If it is intended to affirm that he overlooked or underrated the contrast between a marvellous or a miraculous fact, and one which is common or usual; that he did so with reference to internal improbabilities which might leave the mind without the aid of experience or analogy in considering the evidence in the case, and thus raise impediments to belief more or less difficult to be overcome by that evidence—with the most sincere deference I would say, that to the immediate argument of Butler, the discussion of this would not have been relevant. He had to follow an objector in order to shew that the precise objection which had been made in order to shut out altogether the evidence in favour of revelation, was not valid. The presumption supposed is prior to any evidence, and it was to this presumption that Butler's argument is appropriately confined.

He does not compare nor profess to compare, the narrative of any common fact with the report of some alleged miracle. On the contrary, in his fourth "particular observation" he emphatically excludes the comparison of miracles to facts which are ordinary: these are the subject of contrast, not of comparison, with miraculous facts; for "a miracle in its very notion is relative to a course of nature, and

implies somewhat different from it, considered as being so." What he has here compared is—the presumption before evidence against the *actual happening of a particular accidental* fact or set of facts *which cannot be reduced or referred to any general law or rule*, and the presumption before evidence against any miraculous interposition *on any occasion whatsoever*. It is very material to observe this, and not to introduce a subject of comparison in any respect different from that which is to be found in the very words of the text.

Having shewn the relative strength of the two presumptions which he has expressly considered, he derives an argument from analogy, which warrants him in concluding that there is not any presumption worth mentioning against Christianity as miraculous (if any at all); none certainly which can render it in the least *incredible*. These are the words in which, in his concluding chapter, he sums up the substance of the argument in this, to which I have just directed your attention.

"The *only material question*" at this preliminary stage "is, whether there be any such presumption against miracles as to render them in any sort *incredible*." Why then should it be thought necessary to complicate the discussion with another question, that is not relevant to the exact argument specially directed against the preliminary objection which was supposed to arise, *not out of, but prior to evidence?*

The relative effect of internal improbabilities in any of the cases to which he refers, he does not (so far at least as I can discover) profess to discuss. His argument is directed to shew this, that if miraculous interposition is not in its nature incredible, the preliminary bar is removed, and then we are free to examine the evidence that may be offered in any case of an alleged miracle, the truth of which we are required to believe.

He refers to the story of Cæsar, *or of any other man*. It

would seem from this, that the presumption which he had in his mind, was not dependent on the peculiar conjuncture of circumstances, or the internal improbability of any part of the narrative in the case of Cæsar. It was that which arises in the case of *any* story, from our ignorance of the combinations and the influences, the reciprocal connection and dependence of events, whether great or small. In a word, he deals with that which makes all such matters, relatively to us, *accidental*, because we know not the laws by which they are brought to pass. However various may be the colours, shapes and sizes, they are all alike in the dark; we must wait for the light of evidence to enable us to distinguish. The presumption is *prior to any kind of proof.*

Where, then, do we find in this, that he has confounded improbabilities antecedent to proof with "improbabilities against proof?" His own accurate phrase is "presumption prior to proof." This is the presumption, and the only presumption which here he professes to discuss. If by "improbabilities against proof," is meant internal improbabilities,—these, if not so great as to render in any sort incredible the matter alleged, can be overcome by sufficient testimony; and therefore, in discussing the validity of the preliminary bar to hearing evidence at all, it was not material to notice these improbabilities that might be disposed of by the evidence when examined.

Mr. Mill's criticism on the answers given to Hume by Campbell and others, is quoted by Bishop Fitzgerald as an authority, to shew that, with reference to his description of the alleged weakness of the peculiar presumption against miracles in general, Butler had made the mistake of not distinguishing between "improbability before and after the fact." In the extract from this learned writer, which is given in the Bishop's note, Mr. Mill has explained what he means

by "improbability after the fact"—for, he says at the close, "this alone it is which is improbable in the sense of *incredibility*, or, as we have called it, improbability after the fact." In another part of the same work (vol. ii. p. 59) he says: "The probability of an event is not a quality of the event itself, but a mere name for the degree of ground which we or some one else have for expecting it." Thus, Butler's language—"presumption prior to the proof," or "before the evidence," is strictly accurate; and then if the presumption be not "*such as to render miracles in any sort incredible*," it is not material to consider in this part of his argument, what in fact is a part of the evidence. Therefore, Butler seems to draw a line exactly where it ought to be drawn, when he states what he considers to be "*the only material question*" at this stage of his argument. In the sentence which immediately follows that to which the objection of Bishop Fitzgerald is directed, Butler says:—"the only material question is, whether there be *any such* presumption" (presumptions in first edition) "against miracles *as to render them in any sort incredible.*" This, in its nature, must apply to miracles *as a class*—it must be a presumption which does not arise out of the peculiarities of any individual case, but out of something common to all. It must belong to miracles in general, *i. e.*, to any miraculous interposition whatsoever. Mr. Mill's criticism on the answers which had been given to Hume may be sound; but whether it is applicable to Butler is a different question.

Having drawn the line of distinction, which excludes any such presumption as would render miracles in any sort incredible (*i. e.* 'improbable after the fact,' in Mr. Mill's language), Butler does not at this stage proceed to analyse or weigh the internal improbability of this or that being true or objectively real; this must vary with the circumstances in

each individual case. There may be enough to excite suspicion in some, distrust in others, and to cause the evidence to be more or less carefully sifted, this his argument has nothing to do with these considerations.

Now if you examine the comments in which it is stated that Butler has made a mistake, either by confounding or not distinguishing or the like, you will find that they are mainly dependent on illustrations which are so framed by the commentator, that for a *particular* contingency against which the presumption prior to evidence would be *millions to one*, there is substituted some event against which there would be a very limited presumption, lower sometimes than ten to one. And instead of a representative of "miracles *in general*," you will find some strange and surprising incident, obviously discredited by an antecedent improbability arising from the absence of an intelligible occasion for an interference with any of the known laws of nature. Or a comparison is made between some ordinary and some miraculous *narrative*, supported by some kind or amount of evidence—and a balance is struck, by which it is supposed that Butler's guarded comparison in his two specified cases, under exact conditions, is shewn to be fallacious or untenable. I cannot but think that these illustrations are calculated to mislead. *They compare what Butler does not profess to compare;* and they withdraw attention from the author's text, his precise argument and the subject matter of the comparison to which he has expressly confined his observations. Whatever, then, may be the value of the comments when applied to the comparisons that have been made by the commentators, I cannot find in any one of them an argument or a criticism that I could feel justified in applying to the text of Butler, which is conversant with the presumption, prior to evidence, against a *particular* contingency, and with the like presumption against miracles in *general*.

That Butler was not required to do more in the first and second observation than to remove the supposed objection *as a preliminary bar* to going into evidence at all, is confirmed by this, that in the third "particular observation" he proceeds to shew that when we consider the moral system of the world, we find reasons that give a positive credibility to the history of miracles in cases where these reasons hold. The preliminary objection he had argued and removed on the facts and principles which the objector himself could not but acknowledge. Having in this way shewn that the objector could not reasonably deny that miraculous interposition is not incredible, he goes on to prove that as we find in natural religion, reasons sufficient to render the history of miracles credible in cases where these reasons hold, we are thus enabled to bring miracles, in such cases, within the moral system to which he has before suggested that the order of nature is subservient. In such cases the antecedent presumption which had been supposed by the objector, would altogether disappear. A new element is introduced by which miracles are in certain cases shewn to be not mere exceptions to physical order, but as having a moral end; and whilst they interfere with the laws of a system that is subordinate, they may coincide with those of another that is superior. But the effect of this is excluded if the evidence cannot be examined; and therefore it was material to remove the preliminary bar, in order that the circumstances under which the miracle is alleged to have been performed should all be considered.

"There is one case," says Locke, "wherein the strangeness of the fact lessens not the assent to a *fair testimony given of it*. For where such supernatural events are *suitable to ends aimed at by Him who has the power to change the course of nature*, there, under such circumstances, they may be the fitter to procure belief by how much the more they are beyond or

contrary to ordinary observation. This is the proper case of miracles, which, well attested, do not only find credit themselves, but give it also to other truths which need such confirmation." (Bk. iv. c. 16, s. 13). In s. 8, Locke refers to our belief in the story of Cæsar, because it is "related by historians of credit and contradicted by no one writer." The heading of this section is—"fair testimony, and the nature of the thing indifferent produces confident belief." Locke does not go into the question of presumption before proof in any case; this case he describes as indifferent in its nature. There is in this no difference of opinion between him and Butler, but the latter has gone into the question of presumption before proof; as to the effect of proof they seem substantially to agree.

"Fair testimony," whether in the case of the miracle with its moral interest and its congruous accompaniments, or in the case of the history indifferent in its nature but without any moral impediment to our belief in its truth, these eminent men take to be sufficient to produce the conviction on which we may safely rely. Indeed I cannot but here observe that whilst the story of Cæsar may be to us indifferent in its nature, the history of our blessed Saviour is all important; and the Christian miracles have that moral fitness which arises from their consistency with the character of God, in which are combined His goodness and His wisdom, His omnipotence and His mercy to man.

Thus we see how premature it would have been in Butler to have gone into the question of internal improbability before he could also take into account the moral accompaniments of the miracles of revelation. These forming a part of the circumstances of each case, could not be set off against an antecedent adverse presumption, otherwise than by going into the evidence; but when this presumption was shewn to be

insufficient to stop the inquiry, Butler then took up that which forms so important a part of the matter to be considered. "There is" (says Mr. Mill in the same chapter from which Bishop Fitzgerald has made the extract to which I have already referred) "a general presumption against any supposition of Divine agency not operating through general laws, or, in other words, there is an antecedent improbability in every miracle which, in order to outweigh it, requires an extraordinary strength of antecedent probability *derived from the special circumstances of the case.*" (Vol. ii. p. 160).

Then how are you to get at the special circumstances? You must not shut out, in the first instance, the consideration of the evidence, for it may remove the objection altogether; and if you find that the probability which the special circumstances supply, is such as to outweigh the antecedent presumption against *any* miraculous interposition, then, whether the strength of this probability be extraordinary or not, the case of the miracle is established. Nor is it necessary that it should be extraordinary. For if you eliminate (as Butler has done) this presumption as it stands prior to any evidence, you have only to find in the circumstances a suitable occasion for the Divine interposition, and thus you remove the presumption. Mr. Mill admits "that a miracle considered merely as an extraordinary fact, may be satisfactorily certified by our senses or by testimony;" in this he exactly follows in the wake of Butler. But he suggests that it cannot, in the strict sense, be proved that it is a miracle, because it may possibly be the result of some unknown natural cause.

This supposition, however, only shews that the evidence is not demonstrative, and it leaves the moral inference as clear and certain as before. For "proved" the word "demonstrated" should be substituted, and then how does the matter stand? There are extra-ordinary facts established by fair testimony,

and the proper inference is to be drawn by a moral and intelligent being from all the circumstances submitted to him. Assuming that there is an intelligent Author of Nature and Ruler of the universe (which is Butler's postulate), there is an adequate cause for whatever is not in itself impossible as a contradiction. What remains? Is the special interposition consistent with His character, and is the occasion proper for His interference? Has the transaction those congruous moral accompaniments which are reasonably to be expected? This is not a matter for "strict demonstration," but for the *proof* which leaves no doubt in the conscience; and it satisfies the heart, just as the inference we derive from the world without and the voice within, that there is an intelligent Author of Nature—a Moral Governor of the world. This too may not be capable of "strict demonstration," but it is capable of *proof* sufficient to leave him without excuse who is not convinced. If he has already drawn this conclusion, he has but to go through a like process, in considering the facts and circumstances of an alleged miracle; if he has not, and so does not believe in the existence of a God, he cannot be expected to admit the possibility or the proof of a miraculous interference of an Almighty Creator with the course and order of the world.

We cannot "*demonstrate*" the motive with which man sometimes acts—and yet it is a material element in the consideration of the most important questions of public justice. On the right determination of it, human life and liberty are forfeited according to law. And how is it determined? Not by any *demonstration*. In the correspondence with Dr. Clarke (see Serm. Bell and Daldy's Edition, p. 356) Butler says, "My using the word demonstration instead of proof which leaves no room for doubt, was through negligence, for I never heard of strict demonstration of matter of fact." It is an inference

from the facts—a reasonable inference and a moral probability, such as we act on in the most important concerns of life. You cannot demonstrate all that you may prove, but this may be as certain to the moral conviction as demonstration to the reason, or as evidence to the senses.

Mr. Mill admits that the miracle, as an extraordinary fact, may be certified "by our senses or by testimony." So far as Butler deals with miracles as exceptions to physical order, he has anticipated this admission of Mr. Mill; for, in his fourth "particular observation" Butler says that "miracles must not be compared to common natural events, or to events which, though uncommon, are similar to what we daily experience, but to the *extraordinary phenomena of nature.*" This shews that he had not overlooked the points of contrast, which made the comparison with ordinary events inadmissible. He excludes such a comparison. The very nature of a miracle is exceptional. The presumption against it, in the first instance, is fitly compared to that which would present itself to the mind of a person acquainted only with the daily, monthly, and annual course of nature respecting the earth and the common powers of matter, *upon first hearing* of comets and other such extraordinary phenomena, or of such powers as magnetism, electricity, &c. So that it is by no means certain that there is *any* peculiar presumption at all from analogy, even in the lowest degree, against miracles. Whether there is or not, he says is not important, inasmuch as he has already shewn that, even assuming that the presumption is peculiar, *it is not such in its degree as to render miracles incredible.* He gives a reason for avoiding the very discussion required by some of the comments which impute mistake and fallacy to his reasoning. He shews plainly that he did not consider it to be relevant to the only question which he took to be material at this stage of the argument.

Thus you find that the presumption against miracles, of which he speaks throughout, is that which belongs to them as a class—that antecedent improbability of which Mr. Mill speaks as being in *every* miracle; *but this may be overcome by a greater probability, that may be derived from the special circumstances of the case.* This improbability is not (properly speaking) in the miracle at all, but arises from the presumption that is drawn by our limited knowledge, and, therefore, is capable of being removed by the proof which enlarges our knowledge, and so takes away the ground of the presumption.

PRESUMPTION AGAINST MIRACLES.

CONTINUED.

THE consideration of the preliminary objections which have been made to the credibility of Revelation as miraculous, included that of the supposed peculiar presumption against any Divine interference with the course of Nature after it has been settled and during its continuance; or, in other words, the supposed peculiar presumption against miracles in general. Butler proceeds to establish, first, that if there is a peculiar presumption against miracles *in general*, *i. e.*, against any miraculous interposition, it appears to be relatively unimportant; and there is certainly no such presumption as to render miracles in any sort *incredible ;* and, next, that as the moral system of the world enables us to see reasons for such interposition, this gives a positive credibility to the history of miracles, in cases where these reasons hold. Thirdly, that if we compare miracles as a class, not to the ordinary but to the *extra-ordinary* phenomena of nature, then it is by no means certain that there is *any peculiar presumption at all*, from analogy, even in the lowest degree, against miracles as distinguished from other *extraordinary* phenomena; but that this is of no importance to determine, as the only material question is, whether there is any such presumption as to render miracles *in any sort incredible.* It is the degree, not

the fact of the presumption, that is important. Remember that the presumption supposed by the objector, is put forward as a bar to an examination of the evidence, in *any* case of an alleged miracle. But the objector is met on his own ground, and before he leaves this position, Butler examines the only argument which can be drawn from analogy (and to analogy the objector himself appeals), and he shows that a presumption beyond comparison greater than that which the objector has supposed, may be removed by evidence, and therefore that there is no preliminary bar to the examination of the evidence in a case of alleged miraculous interposition. It is here that the difficulty is generally felt in following Butler; and to avoid, or, at least, to remove this difficulty, a sustained attention is required. The supposed peculiar presumption which he treats as small and as not to be estimated, is (as I conceive), *simply and merely the naked presumption* (*prior to any evidence*), *against the interference of God in any respect or on any occasion, with the settled course of nature.* It is assumed for the sake of argument and under certain limited conditions; for, so soon as we look to the moral system of nature, this presumption disappears.

Miracles are left at last in all their distinctiveness as significant of a divine interposition for a religious purpose; and in no respect is the contrast weakened between the settled course of nature and the miraculous interference of God. I believe that it is by mixing up the consideration of this contrast with the previous question as to the supposed peculiar presumption against any interference at all; by thus complicating, however unconsciously, what Butler had designedly disentangled, that much of the difficulty has arisen in following or adopting his argument at this stage. His caution and exactness are the more apparent, as he expressly forbids the comparison of miracles as a class, to ordinary facts as a class: he had

described what in its very notion a miracle is, and so as to show this comparison to be inadmissible. But the happening of *particular* events of a known class is referred to—not the uniform physical sequences of nature, but matters which we *cannot* reduce to general laws, and which are, therefore, called *accidental.* We have to wait on testimony to certify their happening; and before any evidence, the presumption against the *actual* happening of a *particular* accidental event is such, that it is often beyond the limits of definite calculation; and this may be expressed by saying, that there are millions to one against its happening at all.

It is (as I have observed), the objector who has appealed to analogy in support of his objection; and, therefore, Butler had only to show that there was no valid argument from analogy in favour of the objection. First, he says, we have no parallel case; but if we look to the whole course of nature, to the facts which are within our ken, what is the utmost that we are warranted to presume from analogy against miraculous interposition? The course of nature (as he explains in chap. 4), consists not only of uniform and occasional phenomena which by experience and analogy we *can* bring under general laws, but also of a class of events which *cannot* be referred to such laws, *and are, therefore, called accidental;* and of phenomena which are called *extraordinary.* To compare miracles to matters which are reducible to general laws, is inadmissible in the very nature and reason of the thing; but we may look to the other matters, and see if there is any analogy that can be derived. Now, what do we find in respect of many matters in the course of common life which is a part of the course and order of nature? "The *most seemingly improbable* events in human history may be perfectly credible on sufficient testimony, *however contradicting ordinary experience* of human motives and conduct, simply because we

cannot assign any limit to the variety of human dispositions, passions, or tendencies, or the extent to which they may be influenced by circumstances of which, perhaps, we may have little or no knowledge to guide us." These are the words of Mr. Baden Powell in his essay against miracles in the "Essays and Reviews." Where experience cannot lead, nor analogy guide us, we are altogether dependent on testimony, for in the class of events which we cannot bring under general laws, the unknown reciprocal connection and mutual influence of countless circumstances, the action of causes that we cannot estimate or controul, leave us without the means of getting at the truth of events which have been brought to pass, unless we have recourse to testimony. Before any evidence, the presumption may be as great as we can well express; indeed, so great, that if any of such events should happen to come into one's head, *without any kind of proof*, every one would conclude that they were false. Why so? Simply because there is no evidence of the facts. Where these avenues of knowledge, viz., experience, analogy and testimony have been closed, it is a law of our nature that we cannot believe events to be true and real which happen to come into our head from another approach. The presumption before evidence against such events is great, simply because our ignorance with regard to them is great. We are in a dim twilight in which we are unable to see all that is around us; dark and distant objects are concealed from observation. When we come to consider miraculous interposition, we have no case that is strictly parallel; and then, leaving religion out of consideration, we get into total darkness with reference to the probability of any interruption of the course of nature. We are unable to say how the matter stands as to the happening of an occasion for God's interference; and the presumption against it is, certainly, not such as to render miracles in any sort *incredible*. Now,

with reference to the difficulty in comparing the two presumptions,—perhaps it mainly arises from the circumstance, that *the question is one of degree.* When we are left without the light of experience and of analogy and find ourselves in a twilight, we must make use of the lamp of testimony; when we pass into total darkness, this lamp is not the less available nor less required. It is very easy to distinguish between the light of day and the darkness of night, but most difficult to say at what precise moment twilight ends and darkness begins. There may be just at that critical period, a small additional hindrance to our vision, beyond that which had previously hidden from our eyes obscure or remote objects, yet its relative importance, though it be peculiar, may be as nothing, and it is in itself incapable of estimation. The transition from facts that are usual to those that are often stranger and more improbable than fiction, and from these to the extraordinary and exceptional phenomena of nature; the place also, which testimony admittedly holds in making known what experience and analogy could not teach us—thus instructing the ignorance by reason of which a presumption arises before evidence and by evidence is removed; all this may assure us that miraculous interposition (if not in its nature incredible), may be established also by testimony, in which, by a law of our nature, we instinctively confide.

This has been extremely well put by Professor Jellett, in a very instructive sermon preached in Trinity College Chapel, which I have had the advantage of reading, and to which I am permitted, by his kindness, to refer. "As we know but imperfectly the laws of human thought, and the circumstances under which that thought is developed, *we are obliged to have our information from testimony, and are willing to accept its evidence, though it may contradict the positive anticipations we*

had formed. And shall we say that we know so perfectly the laws of the Divine mind, and the circumstances under which He forms his decision, that we can always afford to reject the evidence of testimony and treat the matter as one of positive science?"

The argument, then, from particular contingencies, so far as it can be applied, is against the objector, and so is that which is derived from the extraordinary phenomena of nature. Our first information as to these may depend altogether on testimony unaided by experience or analogy. If here we shut out evidence, because of a supposed presumption against such seeming excrescences on a system assumed to be settled and complete, how could we arrive at any knowledge of those wonders of the universe of which some are at once "a mystery and a beauty?" But as testimony is here admitted, and thus we are at last enabled to bring within the cosmical system of nature, marvels of creative skill and power disclosed to the inductive spirit that waits patiently upon God, as He reveals Himself in His works to those ministers and interpreters of nature who diligently seek Him—where is the analogy to justify us in shutting out testimony as to other marvels which may be found to be lights of a higher system of morality and mercy? Have we not then found that particular events, extraordinary phenomena, and the moral system, bear witness respectively against the objector, so as to discredit his supposed presumption against the credibility of revelation as miraculous?

I am enabled through the kindness of Dr. Salmon to give you what he has said, in one of his divinity lectures, when speaking on the subject of Natural Religion, as preparing the way for revelation; he says — "When she has ascribed to God those attributes which she has discovered from the study of our own nature; will, goodness, and wisdom, she sees nothing

incredible in the statement, that God may interfere in a manner different from that of His every-day working, in order to point man to a worship which may be accepted as authoritative, to give a weighty support to true ethical doctrine (such support, I mean, as shall induce men to practise it), and which shall reveal to them a future life. *Nay, it needs not this; once admit the existence of a personal God, and his interference with the ordinary course of nature is not incredible, even if we could tell no reason why such an interference might be expected.* For any one who considers the narrowness of human experience, must make allowance for the possible existence of causes of which we have no knowledge."

Again—"I have shown that there are many points in which we can feel that natural religion is painfully defective, and on which we can readily believe that God might be pleased to grant us greater certainty and fuller information. And I have said that besides these reasons which we can see, *no one can venture to say that there may not be reasons unknown to us making it necessary that God should communicate with men.*"

This is, in fact, the substance of that part of Butler's argument which is contained in his second and third "particular observations." To view the matter as Butler did, we must not forget his habitual acknowledgment of the *unlimited* power of God, and the *limited* knowledge of man. The course of nature he has described as that "course of operation, from its uniformity or constancy, called natural, and which necessarily implies an operating agent," (p. 36). He assumes, from the first, the existence of an intelligent Author of nature, and asserts, that, "the very notion implies a will and a character which we are led to consider to be moral, just, and good, and in consequence of this his will and character he formed the universe as it is, and carries on the course of it as he does rather than in any other manner," (p. 136-7).

And in another part he says:—"*What is natural as much requires and pre-supposes an intelligent agent to render it so, i.e., to effect it continually or at stated times, as what is supernatural or miraculous does to effect it for once.* And from hence it must follow that persons' notion of what is natural will be enlarged in proportion to their greater knowledge of the works of God and the dispensations of His Providence. Nor is there any absurdity in supposing that there may be beings in the universe, whose capacities and knowledge and views may be so extensive, as that the whole Christian dispensation may to them appear natural, *i.e.*, analogous or conformable to God's dealings with other parts of His creation, as natural as the visible known course of things appears to us." (p. 31-2).

In reference to the limited capacity and *narrow* experience of man; the connection of actions and natural events with one another, and *their possible natural relation to other actions and events, much beyond the compass of this present world,* he observes: "Nor can we give the whole account of any one thing whatever—of all its causes, ends, and necessary adjuncts; those adjuncts, I mean, without which it could not have been. By this most astonishing connection, these reciprocal correspondences and mutual relations, every thing which we see in the course of nature is actually brought about. And things seemingly the most insignificant imaginable are perpetually observed to be necessary conditions to things of the greatest importance; *so that any one thing may, for aught we know to the contrary, be a necessary condition to any other.* The natural world then, and natural government of it, being such an incomprehensible scheme, so incomprehensible, that a man must really, in the literal sense, know nothing at all who is not sensible of his ignorance in it; this immediately suggests and strongly shews the credibility that the moral world and government of it may be so too." He further suggests that

"the natural and the moral make up together but one scheme, and it is highly probable the first is carried on merely in subserviency to the latter." (p. 126.) By way of illustration I may refer to the treatise of Dr. S. Clarke on the Evidences of Religion, 219—224. His views are clearly stated, and may help you in understanding the text of Butler.

In dealing with the antecedent presumptions which he has compared, Butler takes them as they stand prior to evidence and as relative to the ignorance of man. It is the comparison—not of degrees of *credibility after proof*, but of *presumptions before proof*, in cases in which, from the very nature and reason of the thing, we are altogether dependent on testimony. A case has been put in which a definite number of contingencies are placed in the same circumstances, so that some one must turn up; and as each has the same definite number of chances to one against it, and it is certain that some one of this class must turn up, it is said that here the antecedent presumption does not in the least render incredible the particular event which is alleged to have actually taken place. The presumption before proof is (as Butler himself has observed) altogether removed by almost any proof. But an event, or set of events, which may result from countless circumstances and may be such as to defy expectation, and to be incapable of being estimated in a definite form by any calculation of chances beforehand, is not exactly parallel with the limited contingency and its alternatives. Butler does not say that of the events against which the presumption may be millions to one *before proof*, there may not be differences and degrees of credibility *after proof*, *i. e.*, that some may not be more, some less readily believed; nor does he say that there may not be a like difference between an *ordinary* and a *miraculous* narrative. This raises an entirely different question from that which he discusses. It is very easy to construct a comparison

of an ordinary and a miraculous narrative, and to present a very striking contrast of credibility in these extreme cases. But a contrast almost, if not altogether, as striking might be made out between two cases selected for the purpose, one from the ordinary and the other from the extraordinary departments of nature. We do not ignore the difference of day and night when we compare twilight with darkness, where the question is properly one of degree throughout, and not merely the contrast of extremes. When it is urged, that in the case of a miracle there remains what is described as an "improbability after the fact," which Butler is said to have overlooked; I answer that he has disposed of the presumption prior to evidence, and excluded any such presumption as would render miracles in any sort incredible; and I then ask, what is there left to give to the objection any meaning other than this—*that a miracle remains a miracle?*

The account of the contingency, in the illustration to which I have referred, may be supposed to be more credible (*i. e.*, more readily believed) than the narrative of a miracle which cannot cease to be a miracle; but, so far from overlooking this, it seems to me to be the very ground on which Butler insists that miracles must be compared not to the ordinary but to the extra-ordinary phenomena of nature in the way he has clearly explained.

The natural and the miraculous (according to Butler and Clarke) may be more or less in contrast when viewed in their relation to the knowledge and belief of man; but, with reference to the power of God, all are alike. To a mind so profound—solemnized by his deep consciousness of the moral relation of man to God—a mind at once elevated and humbled—how illusory must the supposed presumption have appeared? It was, after all, like "the baseless fabric of a vision." It could only be supposed to exist by keeping the moral system

out of view and regarding miracles merely as exceptions to the physical order of nature.

In meeting the unbelieving objector on his own ground, the miracle is, in the first instance, regarded in its physical aspect; but, when the preliminary objection has been removed, the moral element is brought forward and the whole question is viewed from an altered stand-point. Before coming to this, it is the cautious definition of Butler which has justified him in the language which he has used in speaking of a miracle at all; and this reminds me that I should call your attention pointedly to a two-fold view of miracles. There is in every visible miracle, what I may call the overt act—the objective reality or effect produced, and this is the proper subject of direct testimony; the moral inference that this has been miraculously brought to pass, is to be drawn from the facts in connexion with all the attendant circumstances. *Thus there is a physical and there is a moral question.*

Hume published his Essay on Miracles some years after the publication of the first edition of the Analogy of Butler, and he has contended that the report of a miracle could not be believed, as testimony was incompetent to prove it. He did not say that miracles were impossible, but it came very much to the same thing, if they could not be proved by testimony. It is not now denied that testimony may prove all the facts of a miracle and the accompanying circumstances, but it is insisted that it is not competent to prove that the effect has been caused by the special interference of divine power. "What is alleged" (says Mr. Baden Powell in his essay recently published in "Essays and Reviews," p. 107), "is a case of the supernatural, but no testimony can reach to the supernatural—testimony can apply only to apparent sensible facts; *testimony can only prove an extraordinary, and, perhaps, inexplicable occurrence or phenomenon;* that it is due to super-

natural causes is entirely dependent on the previous belief and assumptions of the parties." I think it is instructive and important to trace the changes which have taken place in the assault on miracles, and this will enable us to see how completely Butler has dealt with the question in his compendious but suggestive argument. I take Hume's theory; not indeed as Mr. Mill represents it, as if, in effect, it amounted to a kind of harmless truism of no practical value; but, as I find it to be—a mischievous compound of an arbitrary and erroneous definition of the word miracle, and an unwarrantable abuse of the word experience. "A miracle," he says, "is a violation of the laws of nature; and as a firm and unalterable experience has established these laws, the proof against a miracle from the nature of the fact is as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined." But in the same essay (vol. ii. 136, Dub. 1779), he makes this confession. "I beg the limitations here made may be remarked when I say, that *a miracle can never be proved so as to be the foundation of a system of religion.* For, *I own that otherwise there may possibly be miracles, or violations of the usual course of nature, of such a kind as to admit of proof from human testimony*, though, perhaps, it will be impossible to find any such in all the records of history. Thus, suppose all authors in all languages agree, that from the first of January, 1600, there was a total darkness over the whole earth for eight days, suppose that the tradition of this extraordinary event is still strong and lively among the people; that all travellers who return from foreign countries bring us accounts of the same tradition without the least variation or contradiction; *it is evident, that our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact, ought to receive it as certain, and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived.*" According to this statement it follows, that experience is not "unalterable," and testimony is competent to

prove that the settled uniformity of nature has been interrupted, and "the proof against a miracle from the nature of the fact" is not "as entire as any argument from experience can possibly be imagined."

The real difficulty with Hume, seems to have been connected with the use to be made of miracles as "the foundation of a system of religion." It was a difficulty indigenous to the "heart of unbelief." But, I must say, that he has both asserted and conceded more than I am prepared to admit, for I cannot admit that a law of nature could be violated at all. "The laws of nature;" (says Dr. Salmon in his sound and admirable lecture) "are nothing more or less than the most general statements of the results of our observation of the processes and facts of nature. If a new fact comes under our notice, inconsistent with the laws of nature, *such as we have laid them down*, we are not to say that a law of nature has been transgressed, but merely that we have interpreted the laws wrongly, or that our statement of them has been defective. . . . . *For no fact that possibly can take place can be a violation of the laws of nature.* . . . And the progress of modern science is nothing else than the patient observation of such new facts, and the consequent correction and widening of our statement of nature's laws." In truth, the inductive philosophy requires us to enlarge our experience by observation and by testimony, and forbids us to measure creation by our uninstructed capacity, or to stereotype our ignorance by the efforts of *a priori* speculation. The 109th aphorism in the Novum Organum of Bacon, (vol. iv., p. 99), is here very suggestive. How could we know the universal experience of which Hume speaks, except by testimony and communication; and how could individual ignorance be removed, error corrected, or experience enlarged, unless we receive from testimony what by a law of our nature it can give, and we

should take. Individual experience, after all, is merely fractional; and, therefore, our first lesson, and every subsequent increase which our experience receives, must have, each in itself, some positive value. If Hume's main position were sound, it would seem as difficult to enlarge our experience beyond our individual observation, as to make a unit by the addition of cyphers.

The Archbishop of Dublin, in his well-known Treatise on Logic, has thoroughly exposed the inexcusable liberty which Hume has taken with the word experience; and, in the celebrated "Historic Doubts," his Grace has most happily shown the absurdities to which Hume's sophistry necessarily leads. Hume must have felt the difficulty of his position, for he suggests a distinction between what is contrary and what is not conformable to experience. (p. 122.) But this does not relieve him. The Indian prince who refused to believe the first relations concerning frost reasoned justly (he says). But he is afterwards compelled to admit that testimony was competent to enlarge the experience, which in this very case it seemed to contradict. And, indeed, this example shows the inherent fallacy of Hume's position. In the note that may be found (p. 479), he proceeds to modify what he had put forward in the text (p. 122). "No Indian it is evident," (he says in the note, "could have experience that water did not freeze in cold climates. This is placing nature in a situation quite unknown to him; and *it is impossible for him to tell a priori what will result from it.* It is making a new experiment, the consequence of which is always uncertain." That is to say, *the a priori speculative objection was erroneous;* it was founded on mere ignorance, which, under the circumstances, could only be removed by testimony. Here then the sceptic contradicts and confutes himself. There are facts, which although seemingly against experience and analogy, are, *for this very*

reason, the proper subject of testimony that instructs those who could not otherwise have their ignorance removed, or their experience enlarged. "Such an event," continues Hume, "may be denominated *extra-ordinary*, and requires a pretty strong testimony to render it credible to people in a warm climate: but still it is not miraculous, nor *contrary to uniform experience of the course of nature in cases where all the circumstances are the same.* The inhabitants of Sumatra have always seen water fluid in their own climate, and the freezing of the rivers *ought to be deemed a prodigy;* but they never saw water in Muscovy during the winter, and, *therefore, they cannot reasonably be positive what would there be the consequence.*" They would not reason soundly then if they would refuse to hear testimony to prove the prodigy; and, if so, you may naturally ask, how could the Indian prince be said to have "reasoned justly?" And if neither ought to have relied on mere ignorance as a bar to the reception of testimony, has Mr. Hume reasoned justly when he lands himself in such palpable contradictions? It is contrary to experience, he says, that a miracle should be true. To whose experience? If he means that it is contrary to all human experience, then I say, this is begging the whole question, for he assumes that this experience is known to all, and that testimony to establish the fact alleged must *necessarily* be false. If he means that it is contrary to the experience of those who have not been eye-witnesses of it, then I say, this is the very case in which, according to all analogy, we should receive testimony for the purpose of enlarging this experience. This is the very basis of all inductive science. The consciousness of our ignorance suggests that we should be slow to reject a narrative as incredible, merely because it is beyond or even contrary to our very limited experience; the ignorant and uninstructed, the pretentious and speculative, may reject as incredible and

absurd what the patient follower of Bacon would receive as the wise words of "truth and soberness."

Hume's theory, then, breaks down altogether when it is applied to common life, or to the extraordinary phenomena of nature. It ought (says Mr. Starkie in his excellent work on the Law of Evidence, 4th. ed. p. 833, n.) to be stated thus: "Human testimony is founded on experience, and is, therefore, inadequate to prove that of which there has been no previous experience." But, as Mr. Starkie well observes, "the negation of experience is perfectly consistent with the just operation of the principle of belief or faith in testimony, *which is a law of our nature;* and this negation cannot reasonably be supposed to destroy this principle. Negative evidence is, in the abstract, inferior to positive, because the negative is not directly opposed to the positive testimony—*both may be true.*" Again—"That there may be and are general and ever unalterable laws of nature may be admitted; but that human knowledge and experience of these laws is unalterable (which alone can be the test of exclusion), is untrue, except in a very limited sense; that is, it may be fairly assumed that a law of nature once known to operate will always operate in a similar manner *unless its operation be impeded or counteracted by a new and contrary cause.*"

Butler has shown, by his appeal to analogy, that testimony is competent to establish facts, notwithstanding a very strong presumption against them, provided this is not such as to render the facts alleged in any sort incredible. Hume might have said, in these cases, that it is more probable that testimony should be false than that facts, which neither experience nor analogy could certify without testimony, should be true; but here the experience of human life and events (some of which are commonly said to be more strange than fiction) would have repelled if not refuted this fallacy. It does not

follow, that because *some* testimony may be false, *all* testimony should be discredited at the outset; and I may add, that nothing is more contrary to experience than that the testimony of *such witnesses* as have accredited the miracles of revelation, should be false. The case of extra-ordinary phenomena, even of a prodigy, Hume admits to be proveable by testimony; and that *a priori* objections, founded on our previous ignorance, could not be relied on in such cases. Butler most appropriately refers to this very analogy, and to the presumption which naturally arises in the minds of those, who have but a limited knowledge of such matters, when they hear of such phenomena for the first time. The absence of previous experience may properly and naturally induce caution, if not hesitation, in the reception of evidence, which may, therefore, be the more carefully sifted. But such inexperience, however constant, is not sufficient to raise a preliminary bar to the reception or examination of the evidence that must be considered in connection with the probabilities in favour of testimony, and the moral suggestions which the special circumstances supply. If we but look to the lessons of experience in the advancement of knowledge since the inductive method has been adopted, we may see that new facts or phenomena, which had not been observed or known before, *and could not be accounted for by the laws already observed*, have been the means by which more general, and, therefore, more perfect, laws have been ascertained.

The definition of a miracle as a violation of the laws of nature is founded on an assumption and a fallacy, for it assumes all the circumstances to be the same where the effect is natural and where it is miraculous. The action of the frost, as related to the Indian prince, was the influence of a new, and to him, unknown cause, that made all the difference in the result. So long as, in deference to his own ignorance, he

took for granted that there could be no other causes in operation but those of which he had experience, he could not believe the testimony as to the effect. But the testimony was sufficient to establish the truth of the effect, produced by the action of the unknown cause. And so in the case of a miracle, there is the direct interposition of an act of the will of the Intelligent Author of nature and moral Governor of the world, "whose will," as Mr. Mill has said, "being assumed to have endowed all the causes with the powers by which they produce their effects, may well be supposed able to counteract them." What are called the laws of nature, are but some of the expressions of His will with which we become gradually acquainted in the discoveries of science and the disclosures of revelation. His interposition, then, is not a violation of these laws. It is but the subordination of the lower to a higher rule of the one comprehensive system.

Just as in our jurisprudence, equity interferes with common law, and mercy with criminal justice; but equity does not violate law, nor is mercy opposed to justice. We have it confessed by Hume and admitted by Baden Powell, that testimony is sufficient to establish facts though they are extraordinary or even inexplicable—matters beyond the range of experience and the reach of analogy. There is no possible matter, however strange it may seem, how unlike the ordinary tenor of our experience, which yet we may not be justified in believing to have actually occurred, provided that we have competent testimony to the fact. Mr. Mill, therefore, plainly and properly states that miracles, as extra-ordinary facts, are as susceptible of proof as any other extraordinary facts. In all cases in which information is communicated, if it is found to be either unusual or improbable, and, therefore, unexpected—we naturally sift the evidence and scrutinize all the circumstances, and especially consider the credit due to the

witnesses. Much may depend on the circumstances in the case of an alleged miracle—the occasion, the manner, and the agent employed. But no peculiar species of testimony is required different from that offered to prove other events, and especially such as are unusual or improbable. The amount that may be required in any of these cases is not a general question, but depends not merely on special circumstances but on the personal condition of the individual to be convinced — his moral antecedents, his intellectual attainments, his emotional temperament. But this is not peculiar to the credibility or the proof of miracles. The testimony of competent and credible witnesses is all that can be required; and as miracles are relative to the course of nature, the same persons can attest miraculous facts who are suitable witnesses of the corresponding facts that are natural. This is very ably discussed in Mr. Newman's Essay on the Miracles, in the fifth volume of the "Encyclopedia Metropolitana." I may here also refer you to a masterly discussion of the causes of doubt and disbelief and the proper force of testimony, in the celebrated sermon of South on the unbelief of Thomas. When I read it, I could not but remember with satisfaction the happy expression of Hannah More, as to the old divines—"I like the lean of their fat." Well, then, our case is so far made good, that the facts of a miracle can be established by testimony, and by the same kind of testimony as that by which facts not miraculous may be proved. The amount of testimony is an individual, not a general, question; and it is a question not peculiar to the case of miracles. Then wherein is the difficulty now said to exist? It arises *not before the evidence, but after the proof of the facts.* What has Hume said was proper to be done in the case where he admitted that testimony might prove what he assumed to be a violation of a law of nature?—"Our present philosophers, instead of doubting the fact ought to receive it as certain,

and ought to search for the causes whence it might be derived." Agreed. What then? If we find in such a case that there is no natural solution; if it cannot be proved to be a pretence like that of the alleged melting of the blood of St. Januarius at Naples, before we can say that it is altogether inexplicable, we are bound, according to the soundest philosophy, to consider whether it may not be a sign from God. Now, in connection with the facts, there may be such attendant circumstances incontrovertibly established by the evidence, such declarations accompanying the acts done, such an appeal to the moral and religious elements of our nature, as ought to bring clear conviction home to us that it is a miracle—that here is the finger of God. It is a moral inference, for the miracle has a moral element and a moral end. The question is, whether in the whole matter as it is presented and testified, there is enough to leave us without excuse if we refuse to hear the voice from heaven. Our moral nature is as real as the material world around us. It is not because we are enabled to trace in the latter, some of the laws by which physical order is regulated, the uniformity of which consists with that watchful Providence without whom a sparrow falls not to the ground; a uniformity, moreover, without which we could not have a miracle at all—it is not because of this order in the material world, that we are to ignore other facts as real; the freedom and responsibility, the weakness and dependence, the religious instincts, and the moral suggestions that are the mysteries of our being. There is a spiritual and a moral system as well as a cosmical order in the universe. The spiritual and the moral transcend the material. "The case of the miracle," says Professor Jellett, "is no question of the universality of the law of causation which the Christian theory obeys as perfectly as its opponents. The question is, whether, in addition to the causes which we see in operation

every day, another cause, the direct interference of God, has acted at certain rare intervals; and whether this be true must be decided by considerations of the general probability of such unusual interference, the most important of these being the plausibility of the special case which can be made out for such special interference; and, secondly, direct testimony that the alleged effect has been produced. General physical reasonings do not really affect the question. All that such reasonings can establish is, that if no other cause act but those which we see usually operating, and the laws of whose operation we know, a certain effect will invariably follow. But they do not and cannot tell us what effect will be produced under the influence of a new cause, the laws of whose action we know imperfectly or not at all. Information in such cases can only be given to us by testimony. In fact, where the new cause is human interference, this is quite conceded." The provision made for this new cause, in the exercise of our responsible freedom, may well teach us that He who could so establish the moral and the material world on unchangeable laws conformable to His eternal nature, that they should be unaffected by human interference, is able also to provide for His own gracious interference with the material world, in order to restore the moral harmony that man had interrupted. The creature has interfered with the higher system and caused disorder; the Creator with the lower, to restore the moral order of His own creation.

There is a tribute, though unconsciously paid, to Butler, in what we find in the concession of Hume and of Baden Powell, and still more in the exposition of Mr. Mill. It is instructive to compare the summing up of his views at the close of this chapter, with a summary which Mr. Mill has furnished and to which he has kindly allowed me to refer. Butler says: — "Upon all this I conclude that there certainly is no such presumption against miracles as to render them in

any wise incredible; but, on the contrary, our being able to discern reasons for them, gives a positive credibility to the history of them in cases where those reasons hold; and that it is by no means certain that there is any peculiar presumption at all from analogy, even in the lowest degree, against miracles as distinguished from other extraordinary phenomena." The summary of Mr. Mill, to which I have referred, is in these words:—

"My view of the general question is briefly this: that a miracle, considered merely as an extraordinary fact, is as susceptible of proof as other extraordinary facts. That as a miracle it cannot, in the strict sense, be proved, because there never can be conclusive proof of its miraculous nature; but that to any one who already believes in an intelligent Creator and Ruler of the universe, the moral probability that a given extraordinary event (supposed to be fully proved), is a miracle, may greatly outweigh the probability of its being the result of some unknown natural cause." I have already observed* that for "proved" and "proof," the words "demonstrated" and "demonstration" should be substituted. Butler has assumed throughout, the existence of an intelligent Author of nature, and has shown that He is the Moral Governor of the world; that, although there cannot be a strict demonstration of a fact, there may be a convincing proof; that, from the facts which testimony can establish, with all the attendant circumstances, the moral inference proper to be drawn may be clear and certain; that there is no antecedent presumption to make the miracle incredible, and there may be moral reasons to give a positive credibility to the narrative. Is not this sustained by the summary of Mr. Mill, and is it not in all that is material, logically accurate and morally sufficient?†

Where is now the supposed peculiar presumption against

* Ante 17. † See Aids to Faith, p. 29. Hampd. Phil. Ev., p. 236.

miracles in general? In Mr. Mill's clear and compendious summary it has vanished before the belief in an intelligent Creator and Ruler of the universe. This is the only "previous belief and assumption of the parties" (to use the words of Mr. Baden Powell), that Mr. Mill requires, to make that a miracle properly so called, which he who believes not in a personal God (the atheist and the pantheist), will consistently regard as the result of some unknown natural law of the material world. Can this presumption, then, be other than as Butler has described it? Can this be too strong for testimony to overcome if it is found to pass away with the unbelief that has given it birth? Can it be estimated by those who believe in a God?

"*Once admit the existence of a personal God*, and His interference with the ordinary course of nature is not incredible, even if we could tell no reason why such an interference might be expected." Thus the question of miracles resolves itself, at last, into that of atheism. There seems to be no consistent position between the disbelief in a personal God and the acknowledgment of "the pure word by miracle revealed."

"I had rather," (says Bacon), "believe all the fables in the Legend, and the Talmud, and the Alcoran, than that this universal frame is without a mind; and, therefore, God never wrought miracle to convince atheism, because His ordinary works convince it." His eternal power and Godhead, "the invisible things" of the Creator, from the time of the creation are therein manifested, because God has so created the world as to leave impressed on it this testimony as to Himself. Hence it is that Bacon speaks of miracles as "new creations," which are connected with the work of redemption, "whereto all God's signs and miracles do refer," (vol. vii., p. 221, and see 243).

The discoveries of modern science bring out more palpably the special character of the miracles of revelation. These

gather around the great central fact which stands unique in its sublime and solemn majesty—the finished work of man's redemption. Science, as she progresses, shuts us up the more to the acknowledgment of the mystery of God manifest in the flesh—for the miracles by which this has been attested are found incapable of other solution than this—they are signs from God. How consistent, then, that these should stand out in such striking contrast with the course and order of nature, as God's witnesses to His gracious interference with the course of justice! The great poet speaks from the heart to the heart in that noble passage—

> "Therefore, Jew,
> Though justice be thy plea, consider this—
> That in the course of justice, none of us
> Should see salvation; we do pray for mercy.

Here we expect—we implore the Divine interposition, the mercy that is itself a miracle. The religious affections, the instincts of our nature, speak in the voice of prayer, by which we acknowledge that He who has so settled the order of the world as to leave nothing to chance, nothing that is not *provided*, is the

> "Divinity that shapes our ends,
> Roughhew them how we will."

Events which sensibly affect our destiny, we instinctively call providential, when some special occasion reminds us of the watchful providence of God. We should remember that the hairs of our heads are numbered—that in Him we live and move and have our being. In the significant words of Butler, "What is natural as much requires and pre-supposes an intelligent agent to render it so, *i. e.*, to effect it continually, or at stated times, as what is supernatural or miraculous does to effect it for once."

In considering the question of the miracles, we are not asked

to investigate some isolated wonder occurring suddenly by surprise, without warning and without connection. Mr. Smith, the respected minister of St. Stephen's church, has in his valuable treatise on the Christian Miracles, admirably expounded their connection with the moral system and the work of redemption. This is all important. For, as Dr. Johnson has wisely observed, "Although God has made nature to operate by certain fixed laws, yet it is not unreasonable to think that He may suspend those laws in order to establish a system highly advantageous to mankind." . . .

> "Here then we rest, not fearing for our creed
> The worst that human reasoning can achieve
> To unsettle or perplex it."

It is now conceded that the facts set forth in the narrative of our historical religion are the proper subject of testimony, and that by testimony they may be accredited. This is indeed the great concession. The power of God had been at first denied, then, the sufficiency of testimony; but the assailant at last retreats to his native home in the "heart of unbelief." The special difficulty is acknowledged to be, exclusively, the moral difficulty of him who does not believe in a personal God; we need not pursue it further.

I feel that I have drifted into a digression, for which I ask your indulgent consideration, as the subject is one of great interest and importance in its general aspect. Nor is it in other respects merely an academic question. For if I have been enabled in any way to vindicate the accuracy of the illustrious Butler, to expand his argument, and place it in a light that may enable some of you to apprehend it with exactness and satisfaction, I have so far done a service to his honoured memory, and to the cause of religion which was dear to his heart. I feel indebted, more than I can express,

to those esteemed friends with whom I have communicated on this somewhat difficult chapter; they are of "the excellent of the earth,"—men of learning, candour, and piety. Nor can I conclude this lecture without acknowledging a deep sense of gratitude to God, that He has led me here to examine these evidences of His power and His goodness. The miracles were works of mercy; the doctrines were words of truth—"Mercy and truth are met together." They point to the moral order yet to be completed in "the restitution of all things," in "the new heavens and the new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness,"—when each

"Inspired
"By choice, and conscious that the will is free,
"Shall move unswerving, even as if impelled
"By strict necessity, along the path
"Of order and of good."

APPENDIX.

CRITICAL EXPLANATION OF THE ARGUMENT OF BUTLER,

BY THE REV. H. L. MANSEL, B. D.

My dear Mr. Napier,

I do not think that the objection founded on Mr. Mill's distinction between "improbability before the fact and improbability after it" is properly applicable to Butler's argument concerning miracles. Indeed, Mr. Mill himself does not state it as against Butler, but as against Campbell and some other opponents of Hume. Something may perhaps be said in defence of these writers, if we consider them merely as using an *argumentum ad hominem*, arguing against Hume on Hume's own principles; but at present we have only to consider the force of the objection as against Butler, to whose argument it seems inapplicable for the following reasons:—

1. No distinction can be drawn between the improbability that a supposed event *will occur*, and the improbability that it *has occurred*, except in relation to *particular events*, and to the circumstances which distinguish one particular event from another. In relation to *general classes* of events, such as "common events in general," "uncommon events in general," "miracles in general," the two probabilities or improbabilities present no data from which any distinction can be drawn between them. I have no grounds for saying that it is more

or less probable that *some common event*, or *some uncommon event*, or even *some miracle*, took place yesterday, than that it will take place to-morrow. The difference, if there is any, must arise from the *particular character* of the event narrated, or the *particular grounds* of belief or disbelief, not merely from the *general conception* of the event, as common, uncommon, or miraculous. The distinction, therefore, cannot affect an argument which treats only of the presumption against miracles *in general* taking place *at all*, not of the presumption against *this particular* miracle having taken place *as narrated*.

2. The probability that any particular event has taken place as narrated, cannot be measured by any general rule, but may vary with each individual case. Two events belonging to the same class, and, as such, having no difference as regards general probability, may have any degree of special credibility or incredibility, according to circumstances. I may read, for instance, in the same newspaper, the advertisements of two marriages. Considered merely as events of a certain class, there is no difference between them; but I may know something of the persons mentioned, which may lead me to regard the one event as very probable, and the other as so improbable that I rather believe that the advertisement is a hoax. Or some very extraordinary conduct on the part of an individual may be mentioned, which to a stranger seems hardly credible, while, from those who know the person, it elicits only the remark—"just like him." Such cases can only be adequately estimated on *individual grounds*, and not by *general rules;* and, therefore, they do not come under general considerations, such as those of Butler.

3. The examination of Butler's argument, as a whole, naturally suggests a different interpretation of the passage to which the above objection has been thought applicable. The word *presumption* seems to point naturally to objections which may

be urged *before* evidence of the fact, and to indicate that it is with these objections alone that Butler is dealing, both as regards common events and as regards miracles. But Butler further says, that he is comparing the presumption "against *particular* common facts" with that "against miracles *in general*." Let us endeavour to analyse his argument on this supposition.

There are *general* considerations of probability applicable to the examination (1). Of *any* particular ordinary event, considered merely as one possible event out of many, [not of this particular ordinary event as compared with that ordinary or extraordinary; for here probabilities will vary in each case according to circumstances] (2). Of *any* miracle, considered merely *as a miracle*, [not of this miracle as compared with that miracle or that ordinary event; for here again probabilities will vary in each separate case] (3). Of *any* extraordinary natural phenomenon, considered merely *as an extraordinary phenomenon*, [not of this extraordinary phenomenon as compared with that ordinary or extraordinary; for here again probabilities will vary in each separate case].

These are the cases which we might naturally expect to find discussed in a chapter on general grounds of belief, such as Butler's. Let us examine the two latter cases more closely.

(*a.*) What is meant by "a presumption against miracles *in general?*" This must be something common to the whole class of miracles; and which, if convincing, would require us to say, generally, that *all* miracles are incredible, not merely that *this or that* miracle is incredible. I can imagine only two grounds for such a presumption: (1) the belief that there is no power in existence *capable* of working miracles. (2). the belief that there is no power *likely* to work them. The first declares miracles to be *impossible;* the second declares them to be *improbable*, perhaps so much so as to be *incredible.*

With the first of these grounds we are not concerned. Butler is not arguing against atheists: his argument all along supposes a God, who created the present course of things, and who is, therefore, capable of interfering with it. We may, therefore, proceed to the second ground.

Supposing that there is an intelligent Author of the present course of nature, what grounds have we for believing that He will never introduce any deviation from that course? We have *some presumption* of the kind from past experience. God has hitherto governed the world in a certain way; therefore we may believe that He will continue to govern it in the same way, *unless there is some reason for his acting otherwise.* This is the *peculiar* presumption against miracles *in general*, as distinguished from natural events *in general.* It is more likely *a priori* that God will act as He has hitherto acted than otherwise.

This presumption may be strong or weak, according as we know much or little of the scheme of God's government *as a whole.* If what we do know is more than what we do not know, then the presumption is strong; if the contrary, it is weak.

(*b*). There is a similar presumption against extraordinary phenomena of nature *in general*, as compared with ordinary ones. It is, in fact, this presumption which is expressed in the popular use of the word *extraordinary.* "To a person acquainted" (to use Butler's words) "only with the daily, monthly, and annual course of nature," there is a probability that the phenomena of next year will resemble those of previous years; and this is so far a *general* presumption against such phenomena as comets. This presumption, again, may be strong or weak, according as a knowledge of the daily, monthly, and annual phenomena of the heavens constitutes a large or a small portion of a perfect knowledge of all possible astronomy.

This is the sense in which I understand the presumptions mentioned by Butler. First, there is a *general* presumption against any particular ordinary fact, simply as being one possibility out of many. Secondly, there is, over and above this, a *peculiar* presumption against miracles *as a class;* and, thirdly, there is also a *peculiar* presumption against extraordinary natural phenomena *as a class.* Let us see how Butler compares these three together.

First of all, he says, there is a presumption, *before proof,* against any particular event, simply because, without evidence of its having actually occurred, we can only regard it as one out of many possibilities. This presumption may even be as great as "millions to one," where there are millions of possible alternatives; and it may be beyond any calculation, as in the case of the story of Cæsar's life, or of that of any other man. But this presumption is no bar to belief, for it may be overcome by "almost any proof." A miracle, like any other particular fact, has this presumption against it; and *if* it has no more than this, or only a "small presumption" more, it may be believed, like any other event, upon sufficient evidence.

Secondly, we must examine the preceding *if.* There is, besides the above general presumption, also a peculiar presumption against any miracle, *simply because it is a miracle, i. e.,* from the presumption, as explained above, against miraculous events *as a class.* Is this presumption a small or a great addition to the "millions to one" which are against the same event, simply as being one possibility out of many? To this question Butler replies, that, even "if we leave out the consideration of religion," and look merely at our general ignorance of God's government as a whole and of the reasons why He maintains the present course of nature as the ordinary one, we cannot regard this presumption as other than a weak one; for there *may be* thousands of reasons, of which

we know nothing, why God may occasionally depart from His ordinary course of government: and that further [here comes Butler's *thirdly*] if we "take in the consideration of religion," we see, not merely that there *may be some possible* reason, but that there *is an actual* reason for such a departure; and thus, when the miracle is part of a religious revelation, the weak presumption against it, *merely as a miracle*, is destroyed, and gives place to a positive presumption in its favour.

Thirdly [this is Butler's *lastly*] "miracles must not be compared to common natural events, but to the extraordinary phenomena of nature." This I understand as relating to the general presumption against *the class* of miracles, as compared with that against *the class* of extraordinary natural phenomena. "To a person acquainted only with the daily, monthly, and annual course of nature," as regards the celestial phenomena, there is a general presumption against the probability of extraordinary phenomena occurring at rare intervals, such as comets. And so, to a person acquainted only with that portion of God's government which is manifested in the natural phenomena of the world, there is a presumption against supernatural phenomena, such as miracles. Both of these are *peculiar* presumptions against events belonging to the respective classes of phenomena, as distinguished from the *universal* presumption against *any* event merely as one out of many possible. Of these two peculiar presumptions, which is the greater? This depends on another question. Is our ignorance, as regards God's government as a whole, greater than that of a man acquainted only with the ordinary celestial phenomena, as regards astronomy as a whole? This question is one which probably we shall never be able to answer; but, till we can answer it, we have no right to say that we know more of God's government than such a

person knows of astronomy; and, consequently, we cannot be sure that there is any greater presumption against miracles than against extraordinary natural phenomena, *before proof of either*.

I think Butler's divisions of *secondly*, *thirdly*, *lastly*, in the above argument, a little awkward; and the reasoning would be clearer if divided into three heads instead of four, as I have divided above. But I have no doubt that his meaning is as I have here given it; and that he is speaking of the presumption against miracles in general being parts of God's scheme of government; not of the probability for or against a single supposed miracle, reported as an isolated fact. *Some* alleged miracles may be highly improbable or incredible on their own special grounds; and some narratives of common events may also be highly improbable or incredible on their own special grounds; but the peculiar presumption against there being such things as *miracles at all*, is one easily overcome by evidence.

Believe me,

Yours very truly,

H. L. MANSEL.

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on 27 November, 2018